An analysis of citizen participation in anti-poverty programmes

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Abstract   This article explores citizen participation, describing levels, forms and benefits of participation by local community members. In particular, it analyses citizen involvement in anti-poverty programmes, drawing on primary research in Jamaica, where a social fund forms a major plank of the national government's policy and programme to reduce poverty. Using naturalistic inquiry methods, the research sought evidence of citizen participation in social fund subprojects aimed at improving community infrastructure and social services and strengthening community organizations. This article discusses four types of participation revealed by the research and the implications for community-level approaches to economic improvement and social change.

Introduction

Citizen participation has long been regarded as the hallmark of a democratic society. Community development practitioners are among the strongest proponents of citizen participation as an integral element of economic improvement and social change efforts. Over the years, there has been an ebb and flow of interest among social science scholars regarding citizen participation in planning and decision-making processes. Recently, however, researchers have shown renewed interest in participatory processes and outcomes involving citizens at the local community level (Naparstek and Dooley, 1997; Poole and Colby, 2002; Schafft and Greenwood, 2003; Silverman, 2005). This paper analyses citizen involvement in anti-poverty programmes, drawing on primary research in Jamaica, where community participation is a requirement of social fund subprojects designed to reduce local-level poverty.

The citizen participation concept

Citizen participation means different things to different people. In a community development context, participation is 'the inclusion of a diverse range of stakeholder contributions in an on-going community development process, from identification of problem areas, to the development, implementation and management of strategic planning' (Schafft and Greenwood, 2003, p. 19). In relation to an anti-poverty programme, it means the involvement of local citizens in various aspects of the programme, from planning to evaluation.

Citizen participation activities typically take place through two types of structures: citizen-initiated groups and government-initiated advisory or policy-setting bodies. Participation may also occur through the electoral/political system and through obligatory processes such as the payment of taxes, jury duty and military service (Gamble and Weil, 1995).

There are varying degrees or levels of participation, ranging from mere tokenism to genuine sharing of power, or citizen control. Decades ago, Arnstein provided a typology of citizen participation, which remains illustrative and instructive. Asserting that 'citizen participation is citizen power', Arnstein (1969, p. 216) depicted participation as an eight-rung ladder, with each rung corresponding to the extent of citizens' decision-making responsibility or power in determining a desired outcome (Figure 1).

The extent of citizen participation may depend on the purposes and goals of the organization and the kinds of issues it addresses. For example, organizations involved in locality development seem to value community
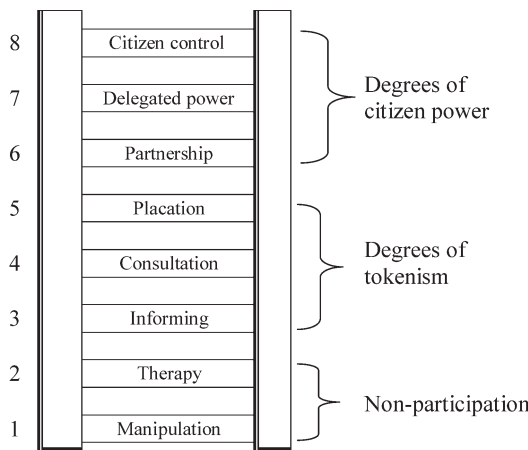

Figure 1 Ladder of citizen participation. *Source*: Modified illustration of Arnstein's (1969, p. 217) 'Eight Rungs'.

residents' participation in determining goals and taking civic action to achieve 'purposive community change' (Rothman, 2001, p. 29). Arguably, this people-oriented approach can effectively build community capacity to address issues and solve problems through a self-help process.

Benefits of participation

The benefits of citizen participation accruing to individuals, groups and communities have been discussed widely for many years (Cahn and Camper Cahn, 1968; Gamble and Weil, 1995; Hardina, 2003; Schafft and Greenwood, 2003). Participation taps the energies and resources of individual citizens, providing a source of special insight, information, knowledge and experience, which contribute to the soundness of community solutions (Cahn and Camper Cahn, 1968). Citizen participation also helps to ensure a more equitable distribution of resources and to improve low-income communities (Gamble and Weil, 1995). Additionally, participation in decision-making may serve as a vehicle for empowerment (Hardina, 2003).

Citizen participation is most likely to be effective when public officials regard it as social exchange, involving reciprocity, balance of power and autonomous representation (McNair, 1981). Therein lies a major issue facing proponents of participation. As long as politicians and politically appointed decision-makers perceive citizen participation to be a threat to their positions of power, they will remain resistant, and, as a consequence, power imbalances will persist. Nevertheless, while participation will not erase power differentials, it may, as Schafft and Greenwood (2003, p. 21) argue, help to 'level the playing field'.

Participation in anti-poverty programmes

Stakeholder participation has been recognized as an essential component of anti-poverty policies and programmes (The World Bank, 1993; UNESCO, 2000). Local community residents, including poor people, are the principal stakeholders in anti-poverty programmes. Naparstek and Dooley (1997, p. 82) have recommended a 'community-building approach' to poverty alleviation, which 'helps create a context in which neighborhood residents can rebuild or strengthen the kind of community-based institutions, organisations and networks that would allow them to escape poverty'. UNESCO proposed a strategy that includes 'encouraging the full and genuine participation of the poor and vulnerable' in poverty assessments, design and implementation of 'culturally sensitive' anti-poverty programmes, as well as monitoring and evaluation of impacts of these programmes at the national and subnational levels (UNESCO, 2000, p. 7).

Community (citizen) participation as an important element in the success of poverty alleviation efforts is underscored in Baker's (1997) cross-country study of poverty in the Caribbean and in Fiszbein and Lowden's (1999) report on poverty-focused partnerships. Similarly, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2000) has highlighted the importance of citizen participation in programmes designed to reduce poverty. When anti-poverty projects are initiated at the community level, the process can build strong consensus and commitment, leading to greater sustainability, greater adoption of new practices and better use of services.

In the United States, anti-poverty programmes launched in the wake of the civil rights movement emphasized the importance of 'resident participation' (Piven, 1967, p. 153). Moreover, the 1964 'War on Poverty' legislation provided for 'maximum feasible participation' of the poor in such programmes (Economic Opportunity Act, 1964, p. 451). The eventual burgeoning of grass-root community action left the local elites decidedly nervous about their positions of power, and they debated how much participation was maximum or feasible. Consequently, there was reduced governmental support for War on Poverty programmes (Hardina, 2003). Attempts to involve people in the decision-making process largely failed, and 'maximum feasible participation' became, in one analyst's view, 'maximum feasible misunderstanding' (Moynihan, 1970).

In Gambia, workers provided technical assistance to expedite the building of community participation in the national Strategy for Poverty Alleviation and to involve local people in project design and evaluation (Stoesz, Guzzetta and Lusk, 1999). In some countries of southern and central Africa, 'popular participation' (or 'people's participation') has been central to recent efforts to reduce poverty (Raftopoulos, 2001, p. 222). Meanwhile, in Morocco, Destremau (2001) found evidence of civil society participation, involving non-governmental organizations (NGOs), in an anti-poverty programme. However, popular participation was 'limited to a formal function of satisfying donors' requests and to a real function of containing internal dissatisfaction, while the challenge [citizens] could represent for the established order is kept strictly limited' (Destremau (2001), p. 155).

The case of Jamaica

Poverty has been a persistent problem and is currently a major national concern in Jamaica, a former British colony in the Caribbean, which gained its independence in 1962. A social fund is one of the principal components of the National Poverty Eradication Programme, which began in 1997 (Moser and Holland, 1997). Jamaica's policy-makers distinguish 'public poverty' from 'private poverty', explaining that public poverty is

deprivation experienced by the community, whereas private poverty is experienced at the household level. This differentiation is made within the context of the social fund, which is targeted at community-level poverty (JSIF, n.d.).

The term *social fund* refers to a national, multi-sector project through which financing is provided to subprojects that respond directly to the priority needs of poor communities as set out in proposals, using predetermined selection criteria (Bowen, 2004; JSIF, n.d.). Jamaica's four categories of subprojects are social infrastructure, economic infrastructure, social services and 'organizational strengthening' (i.e. providing local organizations with technical assistance and training in participatory processes and in the management and maintenance of subprojects).

Citizen participation is seen as an essential element of all funded subprojects in Jamaica, and communities are required to cover at least five percent of the cost of each subproject (JSIF, n.d.). The social fund agency, Jamaica Social Investment Fund (JSIF), has promoted participation to reduce the risk of failure. In particular, the agency has used vignettes to stress the need for equitable participation – even if only consultation – by men and women (Box 1).

Abandonment of Public Wash Facilities in Jamaica

Planners felt that women in a certain urban community should not face the indignity of having to

wash themselves at standpipes in the street. Public bathrooms were constructed, but after a short

time they were no longer used, and women resorted to bathing in the street. Why? The bathrooms

were enclosed and secluded. Women were vulnerable to attack and even rape.

Who was consulted when the bathroom idea was suggested? The community men!

Box 1 Importance of equitable participation in decision-making. *Source*: Jamaica Social Investment Fund (n.d.)

Local sponsors (mainly NGOs and community-based organizations), design consultants, contractors and supervisors are required to facilitate and encourage local community participation throughout the subproject life cycle, from proposal preparation to subproject evaluation. The premise is clear: when beneficiary communities participate fully in a subproject, they are more committed to its success and to sustaining it beyond the life of the funds.

It stands to reason that projects based on needs identified by a local community will be valued by its citizens and will consequently have a greater likelihood of success. Moreover, a community that fully participates in an

enterprise is most likely to claim ownership of it, demonstrating the wisdom espoused in the enduring principle that 'people support what they create'.

In this study, I defined community participation, or citizen participation, as the active involvement of local community residents, particularly persons identified as poor, in JSIF-funded subprojects and in related activities. Genuine participation, and not mere presence, would be indicated by community members' roles in designing, implementing, monitoring, evaluating and maintaining the subproject; sharing of information and contribution of ideas; raising of funds (initially to meet the JSIF requirement and subsequently to maintain the subproject); and contributions to decision-making.

Data collection and analysis

Naturalistic inquiry – specifically grounded theory – methods (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Strauss and Corbin, 1990) were used to gather and analyse data from eight communities – four rural and four urban – in Jamaica. Data were collected and triangulated through in-depth interviews, non-participant observation and document reviews. By means of purposive sampling, two subprojects were selected from each category (Table 1). Thirty-four respondents (local community members) were eventually interviewed at subproject sites, and ten key informants (other knowledgeable persons) provided supplementary data.

As a follow-up to the grounded theory study, reported elsewhere (Bowen, 2005), a constructivist case study approach was employed to re-examine the data through the lens of citizen participation. A case study is a technique for reporting the findings of a naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

Table 1 Social fund subprojects in the case study

Subproject		Category	Setting
1	Hanover Dispute Resolution Community Outreach	Social services	Urban/rural
2	Majesty Gardens Health and Family Life Training	Social services	Urban
3	Maverley Parenting Project	Organizational strengthening	Urban
4	Miles Town and Content Road Repair	Economic infrastructure	Rural
5	New Building Cassava Processing Plant Equipping	Economic infrastructure	Rural
6	Salt Marsh All-Age School Expansion	Social infrastructure	Rural
7	St Elizabeth Homecoming Foundation Organisational Strengthening Project	Organizational strengthening	Urban/rural
8	Windsor Girls Home (Building construction)	Social infrastructure	Urban

It is largely exploratory and descriptive (Yin, 1994) and is particularly applicable when little is known about an issue (Appleton, 2002). While there has been extensive research on citizen participation, few studies (notably Baker, 1997; Fiszbein and Lowden, 1999; Destremau, 2001; Raftopoulos, 2001) have focused explicitly on participation in relation to anti-poverty programmes.

A constructivist approach to the research design was selected because of the emphasis on 'a relativist ontology (there are multiple realities), a subjectivist epistemology (researcher and respondent co-create understandings), and a naturalistic (in the natural world) set of methodological procedures' (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000, p. 21). This approach was appropriate because the focus of inquiry was on participants' construction of meaning and understanding related to an anti-poverty initiative, especially in the context of citizen participation. Case study procedures involve 'correspondence' or a search for patterns and consistency in the data, which helps the researcher understand issues and related behaviour (Stake, 1995, p. 78). In this case, the specific issue concerned the role and relevance of citizen participation in a major anti-poverty initiative in Jamaica.

Evidence of participation

In theory, social fund subprojects include roles for beneficiary communities in every phase: selection, design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. In reality, however, citizen participation was limited, if not lacking, in several phases of the subprojects. The analysed data suggest four types of active participation: material incentive, consultation, resource contribution and programme support (Table 2). Also, passive participation or non-participation was evident among community residents who, while being aware of the social fund subprojects, had no input or real involvement in them.

Table 2 Types of participation in Jamaica's social fund subprojects

Types of participation	Evidence
Participation for material incentive	Community members provided labour for cash payments or food
Participation by consultation	Community members were consulted on the subproject (and their views may have been considered or disregarded), with most of the decisions being made by local leaders
Participation by resource contribution	Community members contributed resources − money, labour, food supplies and storage facilities − 'in the spirit of self-help'
Participation by programme support	Community members supported programmes emerging from the subprojects (e.g. the homecoming programme implemented by the NGO that received organizational strengthening support)

Material incentive

Local residents were motivated by money, as well as the offer of lunch on workdays, to participate in the social fund subproject in their community. In those low-income communities, participation was tied to bread-and-butter issues and concrete outcomes (such as a better equipped cassava processing plant that would generate income for farmers, as was the case in New Building). A respondent observed that '[in] the Jamaican situation, people don't want to gather where they are not being paid to gather'. Residents received paid employment mainly on the infrastructure and service subprojects (Table 1), which were labour-intensive.

Some people who participated for material incentive were 'looking out for themselves' rather than for their community and left themselves open to manipulation by the powers that be. According to Arnstein (1969), manipulation represents the lowest level of citizen participation.

Consultation

Each subproject was identified (discussed initially), proposed or selected by a sponsoring organization ostensibly on behalf of the community. Local sponsors, supported by experts, assumed responsibility for the design (detailed planning) of the subprojects and, in some cases, consulted community members. Thus, they purportedly facilitated the inclusion of local, indigenous knowledge and specific ideas from community residents in the planning process. Citizen participation was much higher during the 'identification' stage than during the design of the subproject. In reality, subproject design was the purview of the executive committee or board of directors of the local organization that proposed the subproject. Participation processes began in earnest only after subprojects had already been designed, suggesting that poor people, by and large, lacked the technical expertise or the intellectual capacity – if not the will – to offer much more than their physical energy.

The consultant role was seen in clear contrast to project leadership roles in some communities. There was a tendency for leadership roles to be distributed mostly among 'better-off' people in the communities. This was the case particularly in one community (St Elizabeth parish), where the real decision-makers were well educated, mostly privileged persons in a coalition (Homecoming Foundation). In this community, the strategic planning process was dominated by elites (although there was broad-based participation in planning and implementing specific community activities associated with the annual homecoming programme). Meanwhile,

project leaders in one urban community (Maverley) stressed collective responsibility:

> We have a committee – the executive body – and we are responsible for providing leadership and guidance for the association. But everyone has to be involved if we are going to achieve our aims and objectives. Every single member must play a part so that we can uplift the community.

Citizen participation by consultation resembled the kind of participation described similarly by Arnstein (1969). The citizens who were 'consulted' may have merely ratified the views of the 'experts'.

Resource contribution

While there were different degrees of participation in each community, participation was highest during subproject implementation, when participation meant mainly the provision of manual labour, paid or voluntary. The subproject sponsors or communities all met the JSIF requirement for a minimum five percent contribution to defraying subproject expenses. For example, one sponsor (Friends of the Windsor Girls Home) contributed J $650,000 (US $13,000) towards the construction of a building to house female wards of the state.

Most communities – 'in the spirit of self-help' – made non-cash or 'in-kind' contributions, especially 'sweat equity'. Respondents explained:

> Our association tried to pool whatever resources we had available to us. We decided to beg, borrow or steal – no, we didn't really steal! However, we asked the business people to support us and we decided to put in as much work as necessary so we could have the project.

> Before we started working on the project, we asked everyone to pitch in, to give whatever they could afford and to help in any way they could. As we say in Jamaica, 'one one coco full basket'. We asked the business people to support us and we got some help with [food items for] lunch and things like that.

> Different people had different jobs to do, whether paid or voluntary. The women would cook and fix the lunch while the men, mostly the men, would work on the road. Even some of the children got involved when they were not in school. . . . We did not contribute money as such; we part-supplied labour. Some people would throw in some money and we would get the food and provide the lunch for the workers. . . . We also provided storage space for the equipment and the materials; and the citizens association monitored the progress of the work.

In one community (Salt Marsh), school authorities (on behalf of the community) provided utilities and on-site storage of equipment and materials for the subproject. In another (Hanover parish), clear evidence of citizen participation was seen in the dispute resolution programme, which had ~50 volunteer mediators.

In a close-knit farming community (New Building), although only five percent of community residents (50 of 1,000 residents) were members of the cooperative, its JSIF-funded enterprise was marked by widespread community participation. In addition to people who worked at the cassava processing plant and those who served on the board of directors, local residents participated as suppliers and vendors in the agro-processing enterprise. On a per capita basis, community participation involving ordinary citizens, especially people regarded as poor, was highest in this community, where residents were involved in all phases of the subproject, from conceptualization to evaluation.

The implementation phase of the infrastructure subprojects had the most galvanizing effect on community members. Not only were residents afforded more opportunities to be involved in implementing those subprojects but they were also able to see immediate, tangible outcomes of their contributions and their work. Equating participation with resource contributions may serve to remind residents that everyone has a stake in a community improvement project. However, if all that is required of poor people is the sweat of their brows, they will remain subjected to top-down decision-making processes and will not enjoy the full benefits of participatory democracy.

Programme support

Subproject sponsors collaborated with various stakeholder organizations, including churches, citizens associations, parent–teacher associations, youth clubs, the government's Social Development Commission and JSIF. The sponsors sought to sustain the interest and support of their members and other stakeholders from within and outside the local community in order to execute programmes as a follow-up to the completed subprojects.

In an inner-city community (Majesty Gardens), the construction of a sanitary block (consisting of eight communal showers and toilets) engendered substantial community participation. The subproject coordinator explained:

> We have a group of block leaders. We get members from the community that live around the sanitary blocks and we form a group that we call the block leaders. . . . If we see garbage on the road, we just get up in the mornings and just go out and clean it up. . . . We have golden agers [who are] feeble . . . and can't look after themselves. We go into their house and clean it . . . and see to it that they have a good meal.

A sentiment expressed at one subproject site, with variations at other sites, was that . . .

> . . . This community belongs to all of us; and we cannot depend on the government to do everything for us. We have to take some responsibility too.

Further, a rural subproject sponsor (Miles Town/Content Citizens Association) provided programme support as association members honoured a three-year commitment to manage the upkeep of the repaired road. Besides, the association also embarked on improvement work at the community centre, where members erected a fence and constructed a bathroom. As a key informant confirmed, there was 'high, substantial involvement' of local citizens in the community centre project.

A community named Windsor offered a good example of what could be achieved through citizen input together with adequate funding. Following the completion of the JSIF-funded subproject, the local sponsor (Friends of the Windsor Girls Home) collaborated with the Green Fund of the Canadian Fund for Local Initiatives to implement a soil conservation project. The Green Fund provided the money; the Friends transported the materials and supervised the project.

People in rural areas were more likely to give voluntary labour for a community project than those in urban areas. A respondent in an inner-city community observed: 'Only a few people, one or two, will pitch in and help – only the willing ones'. In contrast, a rural community respondent spoke about the 'whole lot of people' who worked cooperatively to repair and maintain the three-mile road that was repaired with a social fund allocation.

In sum, material incentives prompted residents to participate in the community-based anti-poverty subprojects, and citizens participated by being consulted, by contributing resources and by providing programme support. In general, participation at the community level represented a sustaining factor in the funded subprojects. However, participation was limited to specific phases of the subprojects, and only the implementation phase was highly participatory. Consistent with the social fund policy-makers' expectations, the study indicated that community residents' participation in the subprojects served to build consensus and commitment, to some degree, as stakeholders developed a sense of ownership of the subprojects and the programmes they spawned.

Implications and conclusion

Jamaica's social fund project exemplifies a bold attempt to use a bottom-up approach to community improvement and poverty reduction. By requiring beneficiary participation in all phases of a subproject (although with limited

success), the funding agency seemed to be acknowledging the importance of a community voice in decision-making. Still, citizen participation in the subprojects largely reflected tokenism and, in only a few instances, rose to the partnership rung of Arnstein's (1969) ladder, indicating that the average citizen lacked the power to influence community plans and programmes.

Indeed, citizen participation is bound up with issues regarding power, privilege and resources. Community leaders who are considered more educated and technically competent tend to dominate decision-making. Citizen participation could be improved if there were the fullest possible involvement of local community residents in subprojects, from design to evaluation. Ordinary citizens need to get appropriate training and support so that they become more knowledgeable and competent as community development partners and decision-makers. Such training will build community capacity to address issues and solve problems with less dependence on elites and on external aid.

Citizen participation is the essence of democracy. It can have an instrumental effect in creating favourable conditions for economic improvement and social change. From a developmental perspective, participation can promote new values, attitudes, knowledge and skills among citizens and build their capacity as agents of change. Yet, citizen participation, conceptualized as citizen power, is fraught with complexities and challenges, and one recognizes the fallacy of assuming that transfers of power are easily achieved. Genuine participation requires that special attention be paid to involving all constituent groups in the local community, including poor people, in strategic planning and decision-making. Without the full involvement of community members, citizen participation will remain largely a goal, rather than a reality – or, at best, only a mellifluous cliché lisped out from reassuring lips.

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